

### CollectiveAction2.0: the Impact of ICT-Based Social Media on Collective Action - Difference in Degree or Difference in Kind?

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**CollectiveAction2.0:**

**The Impact of ICT-Based Social Media on Collective  
Action – *Difference in Degree or Difference in Kind?***

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## Introduction

„*The Revolution Will Be Twittered*“<sup>1</sup>

*Or will it?*

Recent events in different authoritarian regimes, such as the Muslim States Iran and Egypt, drew a considerable amount of attention to a developing phenomenon in collective action. People in those countries organized themselves through different social media platforms, such as Twitter and Facebook, for political protest and resistance.

This phenomenon implies a change in social structures and social behavior, which is intrinsically tied to Information and Communication Technologies (ICT). The use of social media platforms in order to leverage collective action, which can eventually also lead to a political revolution, demonstrates the significance of ICT and social media in people's ability to organize.

Furthermore, this phenomenon points out how developed methods for organizing and managing of information, which are possible primarily in digital form and with intangible information-objects, can in turn affect people's organization. In many contexts, information is not organized in linear and predefined hierarchies any longer, but rather in a network-form with flexible, adaptable and context-relevant structures. As soon as those principles are implemented in people's communication (and a critical mass of use is achieved), as is the case with social media, the technologies facilitate the adoption of decentralized, non-hierarchical manners of organization. Groups of people can communicate with each other simultaneously and organize in a network form.

The following paper will examine social media's impact on collective action. It will begin with an outline of relevant models of the *social movement theory*. A description of the role that ICT play in collective action in accordance with these models follows and then continues with a close analysis of the impact social media has on collective action. This work will conclude with a description of the adjustments required in the analysis-framework, as social media changes the collective action equation, with emphasize on the possible dangers that should be avoided when addressing social media's role collective action.

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<sup>1</sup> Sullivan, A. (13. June 2009).

# 1. Clarification and Demarcation of Terms

Before addressing the relation between ICT and collective action, there is a need to clarify what is meant by the terms that will be used throughout the paper and to demarcate them from other meanings they may have.

*ICTs* are technologies that are used as means to handle information and aid communication. On a broader sense they can be seen as mediums for storing and processing information outside the human mind as well as for communication in channels beyond the traditional *vis-à-vis* setting, thus replacing certain mental functions and historically grown social Institutions.<sup>2</sup> “Low-Tech” mediums, such as books or leaflets, can therefore be regarded as ICTs.

*Social media platforms* or *social media* are the most common terms for (“Hi-Tech”) ICT-based communication platforms such as Twitter and Facebook. Those platforms are most commonly accessed through the Internet. Due to the variety of tools offered and the rapid pace of development of new features, policies and applications, it is challenging to identify the unique qualities of social media based on its features alone. It could generally be said that social media integrates different forms of computer-mediated communication (CMC).<sup>3</sup> Hogan and Quan-Haase emphasize the *social affordance* of social media (i.e. its perceptual invocation that facilitate interaction) as a crucial feature of social media as well. Beyond the interaction aspect, these affordances allow individuals to perceive aspects of their social environment.<sup>4</sup>

Unlike many other ICTs, the access to some social media platforms doesn’t depend on one designated end-device (e.g. a computer with Internet access), but rather can be achieved by the growing number of Internet-connected devices. Furthermore, some functions can be accessed without Internet access, for example publishing on Twitter via SMS.<sup>5</sup>

Social media also affords two-way interaction with an audience, beyond any specific recipient. This form of communication falls under the term *many-to-many*<sup>6</sup>, in which messages are broadcast to a wider audience that can then engage in an exchange.<sup>7</sup> Many-to-

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Giesecke, M. (1990), 75-78.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Hogan, B., & Quan-Haase, A. (2010), 309-315.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. *ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> Twitter, I. (2011).

<sup>6</sup> Shirky, C. (2008).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Hogan, B., & Quan-Haase, A. (2010)

many communication is an aspect of great importance in social media's impact on collective action and is handled elaborately in chapter 4.1 of this paper.

The wide spread term *social networks*, which is often used to describe social media platforms, already conceives a specific meaning in sociology and the social movement theory.<sup>8</sup> On that account I will use the term in its sociological sense.

ICTs and mass media are closely related to *Social Movements* and *Collective Action*<sup>9</sup>. The dissemination of information, as well as communication between parties or agents, is a vital precondition for collective action. ICTs facilitate these functions, and as they develop, their functionality (of helping agents to better overcome obstacles such as geographical distance) is increasingly influencing the collective action repertoire.<sup>10</sup>

Before addressing this issue further, an outline of relevant models of the social movement theory is needed in order to grasp the relation between ICT and collective action to its full extent and to examine the change offered by social media.<sup>11</sup> The following chapter provides such an outline.

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<sup>8</sup> See section **2.4. Social Networks**.

<sup>9</sup> The terms *social movements* and *collective action* will be addressed separately in chapter **2. Social Movement Theory – Relevant Models and Aspects**.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Taylor, V., & Van Dyke, N. (2004), 273.

<sup>11</sup> The following chapter does not aim to offer a complete overview of the social movement theory, but rather of its most relevant models and aspects, which will be addressed afterwards in regard to social media.

## 2. Social Movement Theory – Relevant Models and Aspects

“Social movements are one of the principal social forms through which collectivities give voice to their grievances and concerns about the rights, welfare, and well-being of themselves and others by engaging in various types of collective action, such as protesting in the streets, that dramatize those grievances and concerns and demand that something be done about them.”<sup>12</sup>

Collective action, at its basic level, consists of any goal-directed activity, engaged by more than one single agent. It entails the pursuit of a common goal through joint action and can take many forms, such as crowd behavior, riot behavior, interest-group behavior, or large-scale revolutions. It is useful to differentiate human behaviors included in this definition into those that are institutionalized or normatively sanctioned, and those that are not and that take place outside of institutional framework.<sup>13</sup>

Traditionally, most of the non-institutional collective actions, including those associated with social movements, are treated as varieties of *collective behavior*. Collective behavior is broadly conceived as extra-institutional behavior that is directed at solving collective problems and encompasses an array of collective actions.

Social movements, which are a form of collective action, overlap to some degree with some forms of collective behavior. But they also differ significantly from most its variants, such as crowd panics. Social movements also share similarities with interest groups. However, in contrast to interest groups, social movements tend not to be embedded in the political arena and tend to have interests that extend well beyond mere political aspects. Social movements also differ from interest groups in the means they utilize, which are non-institutional one, such as demonstrations, boycotts, and sit-ins.

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<sup>12</sup> A. Snow, D., A. Soule, S., & Kriesi, H. (2004), 3.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 6-11.

## 2.1. The Formation of Collective Action - From an Individual Agent to a Collective

### 2.1.1. Strain and Breakdown Theories

In the classical theories of collective action, sociologists recognized collective behavior to be irrational and/or emotional reaction of individuals to situations outside of their control. Thus forming crowds that “were theorized to act under the sway of intense emotional states generated by physical proximity; such behavior was marked as contrast to the rational and orderly behavior that prevailed in conventional social settings”<sup>14</sup>. The notions of irrationality and the loss of individuality under the collective were later criticized, above all by the *resource mobilization* tradition. Critics often claim that those who protest are often better integrated than those who do not, and that tight social networks rather than random contagion are often connecting sites of protest.<sup>15</sup>

On this foundation, Blumer defined collective behavior as a group activity that is largely spontaneous, unregulated and unstructured. It is triggered by ‘cultural drifts’, disruptions in standard routines of everyday life, and development of new views of individuals regarding what they believe they are entitled to. Those ‘cultural drifts’ promote circular reaction or interstimulation with qualities of contagion, randomness and excitability. Social unrest thus provides the conditions for the formation of collective behavior in its various forms, including crowds, masses, publics and social movements.<sup>16</sup> Through symbolic communication and interaction, initially unstructured collective behavior can in turn promote emergent norms and incipient forms of order.<sup>17</sup>

Two major factors of collective action can be concluded from this model. First, collective behavior is triggered by some tension, disruption or collapse in normal social routines. Second, collective behavior set off from conventional behavior and comprised elements of contagion, spontaneity, and emotionality.

On the social-psychological level, the theory of *relative deprivation* views collective behavior as a result of people’s assessment of their current situation against various reference groups or past situation or anticipated future situation. A condition of relative deprivation exists when people find a benchmark that implies a situation better for them than the current one, which

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<sup>14</sup> Buechler, S. M. (2004), 49.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Koopmans, R. (2004), 22-23.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Blumer, H. (1995), 49.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Buechler, S. M. (1994), 49.



could or should be achieved. This psychological strain triggers participation in collective action.<sup>18</sup>

On the basis of Durkheim's analysis of modern society, which provided a major foundation for subsequent theories of collective behavior, Buechler summarized the above-mentioned theories under the term *Strain and Breakdown Theories*. The concepts of strain and breakdown are the connecting threads of an otherwise diverse group of social theorists addressing collective behavior.<sup>19</sup> According to Buechler, sociologists of the various schools<sup>20</sup> "regularly invoked strain and breakdown as explanations for collective behavior"<sup>21</sup>, so that "[i]f the social order remains sufficiently integrated, strain and breakdown may be avoided altogether and collective behavior may be precluded".<sup>22</sup>

### 2.1.2. Shared Awareness

A further level in the promotion of collective identity is the process of *shared awareness*, which is the perception among individuals that they are members of a larger group by virtue of their shared grievances. Shared awareness motivates otherwise uncoordinated individuals or groups to begin cooperating more effectively.<sup>23</sup> Shirky divided this kind of social awareness to three simplified levels:

1. *Everybody knows something* is a state or relative deprivation within many individuals that are not yet gathered together.
2. *Everybody knows that everybody knows* is when a shared awareness begins to form and individuals realize that the relative deprivation is spread among their close circles (such as family, friends, and co-workers).
3. *Everybody knows that everybody knows that everybody knows* describes a situation of reciprocal awareness. Individuals are not only aware of the relative deprivation but they are also aware of the fact that many others (also outside their close circles) are also aware (1) of the relative deprivation (2) of the fact that others are also aware of it.

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<sup>18</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 49-50

<sup>19</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 48-51.

<sup>20</sup> Buechler mentions Durkheim, European crowd theorists, early Chicago School, and the structural-functionalists, of which not all were completely or equally represented.

<sup>21</sup> Buechler, S. M. (1994), 50.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 48

<sup>23</sup> Cf. Shirky, C. (2008), 163-164; R. Kelly, G. (2006).

This, according to Shirky and to the strain and breakdown theories, is a necessary step for triggering collective action.<sup>24</sup>

### 2.1.3. Rational Choice

*Rational choice* is an important factor in an individual's decision if to join a social movement or take part in collective action.

In contrast to many of the strain and breakdown theories and in relation to the resource mobilization theory, this theory addresses individuals as rational actors, who strategically weigh the costs and benefits of joining a social movement or a collective action. Compared with alternative courses of action, including the option of not taking any action at all, a decision for the course of action that is most probable to have maximal utilization is made.

Costs and benefits are not understood only in their economical meaning, but also in other meanings such as social, political, and personal.<sup>25</sup>

## 2.2. Resource Mobilization

The resource mobilization theory emerged in the 1970s. The theory puts resources at the center of the analysis of social movement and stresses movement member's ability to acquire resources and mobilize people towards accomplishing the movement's goals. In contrast to several of the strain and breakdown theories, resource mobilization sees social movements as rational social institutions, created and populated by social actors with certain goals. Some versions of the theory point out the similarity of social movement's operation to capitalist enterprises, due to their striving for efficient use of available resources.<sup>26</sup>

The theory includes a fivefold typology of resources:

1. *Moral Resources* include legitimacy, solidarity and sympathetic support to the movement's goals. Those resources tend to originate outside of a social movement and are generally being granted by an external source. Therefore the source can also retract those resources. A fact that makes them less accessible and more proprietary than cultural resources.

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<sup>24</sup> Shirky, C. (2008), 163-164.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Diani, M. (2004), 346; Klandermans, B. (2004).

<sup>26</sup> Cf. McCarthy, J. D., & Zald, M. N. (1977).

2. *Cultural Resources* are artifacts and cultural products such as conceptual tools and specialized knowledge that have become widely known. These include among others understanding of the issues, collective action know-how, prior activist experience and organizational templates. Those resources are widely available, less proprietary, and accessible for independent use (compared to moral resources).

This category also includes use or issuance of relevant productions such as music, literature, magazines, films and websites. Those products facilitate the recruitment and socialization of new agents and help maintain readiness and capacity for collective action.

3. *Social-Organizational Resources* divide into three general forms:
  - Infrastructures, such as organizational strategies, facilitate the smooth functioning of the movement's processes.
  - Access to social networks<sup>27</sup>, such as groups and formal organizations, and thereby the resources embedded in them.
4. *Human Resources* include resources like labor, experience, skills and expertise, which are embodied by individuals such as the movement's volunteers, staff or leaders (i.e. the movement's *human capital*).
5. *Material resources* refer to financial and physical capital, including monetary resources, property, office space, equipment and supplies.<sup>28</sup>

These resources have four identified mechanisms of access:

1. *Aggregation* of resources held by dispersed individuals and their conversion into collective ones that can in turn be allocated by movement actors.
2. *Self-Production* refers to mechanisms in which movement actors create or add value to resources that have been aggregated, co-opted or provided by patrons.
3. *Co-Optation* is the transparent, permitted borrowing of resources that have already been aggregated by other existing forms of social organization. *Appropriation* on the other hand, is the secret exploitation of the previously aggregated resources of other groups.

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<sup>27</sup> See section 2.4 Social Networks.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Edwards, B., & John, D. M. (2004).

4. *Patronage* refers to the awarding of resources to a movement by an individual or organization. Alongside the patronage there is typically a degree of proprietary control exercised which determines how gained resources can be used, and even can attempt to influence over day-to-day operation and policy decisions.<sup>29</sup>

Access to resources is deeply embedded in existing social and economic relation and thus varies greatly between social groups. Although the efficient use of some resources can in some cases compensate for the lack of others, the likelihood of effective collective action appears to be enhanced by the availability of diverse kinds of resources.<sup>30</sup>

The following table illustrates the relation between resource types and mechanisms of access:

**Table 6.1** Means of Social Movement and SMO Resource Access and Resource Types

<i>Means of Access</i>	<i>Moral</i>	<i>Cultural</i>	<i>Resource Types</i> <i>Social-Organizational</i>	<i>Human</i>	<i>Material</i>
<b>Aggregation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lists of endorsers</li> <li>• Recruiting celebrity endorsers</li> <li>• Advisory committee members on letterhead</li> <li>• Soliciting statements of support for specific projects</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social movement schools movement mentoring orgs.</li> <li>• Movement initiated summits and workshops where groups come together to share advice, information, strategy</li> <li>• Working groups</li> <li>• Ideas</li> <li>• Frames</li> <li>• Tactical repertoires</li> <li>• Music</li> <li>• History</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Building networks</li> <li>• Forming coalitions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recruiting constituents</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Member contributions</li> <li>• Emily's list</li> <li>• Individual donations from non-members</li> </ul>
<b>Self-Production</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Moral authority from the effective use of non-violence (e.g., King, Gandhi)</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Founding SMOs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Raising and socializing children,</li> <li>• Issue/movement oriented summer camps</li> <li>• Training</li> <li>• Movement Mentors</li> <li>• Women's, Environmental, or Black studies programs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Grassroots fund raising events</li> <li>• Creating items for sale at events (T-shirts, posters, CDs, coffee mugs, etc.)</li> </ul>
<b>Co-optation/ Appropriation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Allying yourself with a well-respected group</li> <li>• Hiring grassroots supporters to lobby officeholders</li> <li>• Company unions</li> <li>• Listing links to prominent, well respected groups on your webpage</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Providing links on your webpage to materials produced by someone else</li> <li>• Links to someone else's webpage</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Recruiting local affiliates from existing organizations</li> <li>• Gaining access to congregations for solicitation</li> <li>• mesomobilization</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Networked recruitment</li> <li>• Acquiring a mailing list</li> <li>• Organizational members</li> <li>• Bloc recruitment</li> <li>• Drawing on members of coalition partners</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Office space</li> <li>• Buses</li> </ul>
<b>Patronage</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A widely respected person or organization recognizing a group or activist in order to call positive attention to their work</li> <li>• Human rights awards</li> <li>• Nobel Pax Prize</li> <li>• An audience with the Pope</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Excellence awards aimed at competence or effectiveness</li> <li>• Accreditation of fiscal procedures to enhance confidence of supporters and donors</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Being loaned the mailing lists and telephone lists of sympathetic individuals</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Providing staff</li> <li>• Providing technical assistance</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Start-up grants</li> <li>• Large donations</li> <li>• Foundation grants</li> <li>• Government grants</li> <li>• Service contracts</li> <li>• Corporate sponsorship</li> </ul>

**Figure I: Means of social movement resource access and resource types.**  
Source: Edwards, B., & John, D. M. (2004), 132-133.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. *ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Cf. *ibid.*

### 2.3. The Cultural Context of Social Movements

The study of social movements and collective action's 'cultural turn' has its roots in 1980s US scholarship. One interpretation of the culturalist approach, the *new social movement (NSM)*, focuses on movement's cultural, moral, and identity issues, rather than on economic distribution. Its cultural component has to do with the content of movement ideology, the concerns motivating activists, and the arena in which collective action is focused. The NSM shifts the focus of analysis from material interests and economic distribution, placing actors in economic classes or as ones, to cultural understandings, norms and identities. NSM also gives explicit attention to the connection between the forms of collective action and the historical moments and societal formations in which they existed.<sup>31</sup>

The second and more extensive tendency in the culturalist approach is toward the implementation of meaning into a movement. It focuses on the ways in which movements use symbols, language, discourse, identity and other dimensions of culture to recruit, motivate and mobilize members. Scholars of this tradition are particularly interested in the interpersonal processes through which individuals understand their own actions and how they find ideational, moral and emotional resources to continue.<sup>32</sup>

Within this approach, *Framing* is the most prominent model (although not the only one). Framing focuses primarily on the deployment of symbols, claims and identities in the pursuit of activism. It theorizes the symbolic and the meaning of work done by movement activists as they articulate grievances, generate consensus on the importance and on the forms of collective action to be pursued, and present their audience with the rationale for their actions and for the proposed solutions. The audience can include media, elites, potential recruits, sympathetic allies and antagonists.<sup>33</sup>

In psychology and sociology, frames address schemes of interpretation and providing meaning. Frames can be biologically ("naturally") or culturally and socially constructed, thus varying between individuals from different social and cultural (religion, profession, political opinion, sexuality, language etc.) or biological (age, physical disability, biological sex etc.)

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<sup>31</sup> Cf. Williams, R. H. (2004), 91-95.

<sup>32</sup> Cf. *ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Cf. *ibid.*

contexts. They serve as mental filters, thus the choice of frames influences the interpretation and ‘sense making’ of the surrounding world.<sup>34</sup>

When articulating their positions and goals, employing phrases and symbols and granting them with meaning, movements participate in a process of selective influence of individuals in their audience and construction of the perception (the frames used) by the same individuals. “Successful” framing can be considered when the employed frames align with the audience’s frames and result in resonance.<sup>35</sup>

Based on various analytic templates for the analysis of culture, Williams offers a five-pointed ‘star’ scheme, where each point represents a different aspect in which culture can be studied:

1. The cultural object itself.
2. Cultural producers.
3. Culture consumers/receivers.
4. The institutional environment in which culture is produced and used.
5. The cultural field or environment in which cultural objects are produced and received.<sup>36</sup>

Sociologists usually examine the connections between any two, and sometimes three, of these points. As shown above, it is common in the framing notion to examine the connections between cultural producers (e.g. movement activists), cultural receivers (e.g. bystander publics and potential adherents), and the cultural object itself (usually a public claim made by a social movement).<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Cf. Goffman, E. (1986), 1-40.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Williams, R. H. (1994); Snow, D. A. (2004).

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Williams, R. H. (1994), 97.

<sup>37</sup> Cf. *ibid.*

## 2.4. Social Networks

As individuals in a society, we are all members in different groups, that is to say different social milieus. Socio-economical classes, religion, nationality, gender, age, profession etc. constitute a person's identity that is in turn enacted in different ways such as her *habitus*<sup>38</sup>.

Different interfaces and institutions in these group affiliations link individuals with each other, thus constructing *social networks*. All members of a social milieu (a religion for example) do not necessarily create a social network, but members of an institution related to this group possibly do (a church in small town, whose members meet on a more or less regularly basis).<sup>39</sup> Also social institutions in their abstract sense, such as friend circles, family, or Twitter-followers are types of social networks. Just as a person's *habitus* is a *mélange* of social dispositions such as taste, aesthetic, and norms constructed by her various social milieu affiliations<sup>40</sup>, a person's identity can be seen as a *mélange* not only of her group affiliation but also of her social networks affiliation (and, of course, a variety of further factors).

When zooming out to the group level, it is not only the group members' identities that are defined among others by their group membership, but also the group's identity that is defined by the identities of its members. Furthermore, multiple memberships serve as channels for circulation of information, resources, and expertise among (social movement) groups.<sup>41</sup>

### 2.4.1. The Role of Social Networks in Collective Action

On that account, as Diani points out, collective action can be associated with "CATNETs, that is, with the co-presence in a given population of *cat*(egorical traits) and *net*(works). While the former provided the criteria on the basis of which recognition and identity-building would take place, the latter constituted the actual channels of communication and exchange which enabled the mobilization of resources and the emergence of collective actors."<sup>42</sup>

Various scholars have pointed out a considerable relevance of social networks to mobilization of social movements members. Besides the recruitment phase, social networks seem to discourage leaving, and to support further participation in the social movement. However,

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<sup>38</sup> Bourdieu, P. (1993).

<sup>39</sup> Cf. Shirky, C. (2008), 212-232; Diani, M. (1994).

<sup>40</sup> Cf. Villa, P.-I. (2008).

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Diani, M. (1994).

<sup>42</sup> Diani, M. (1994), 341.

there are several instances of mobilization occurring outside social networks, or not occurring despite social networks.<sup>43</sup>

McAdam and Paulsen concluded that social networks and embeddedness in organizational links do not have the greatest influence on mobilization, rather a strong commitment to a particular identity or agenda, reinforced by ties to participants (i.e. having other participants in ones social networks) contribute most to mobilization.<sup>44</sup>

Furthermore, the strength and quality of ties and not their quantity seem to have more influence on mobilization of individuals. Smaller or denser social networks, which have a small number of strong ties, are more probable to be result in mobilization as a whole ('bloc recruitment'). Also, a connection to a participant with a large quantity of resources can encourage mobilization, by influencing an individual's rational choice.<sup>45</sup>

#### 2.4.2. Small Worlds

As mentioned above, sociologists and scholars of social movements have given attention to multiple memberships in social networks and its role in circulation of information and resources.

However, the *Small Worlds*<sup>46</sup> model, presented by Watts and Strogatz in 1998, was the first to offer an extensive explanation of the connection between social networks that holds the networks together and foster the circulation of information and resources between them.

Small world networks have two characteristics that, when balanced properly, support this circulation:

First, small groups are densely connected. That is, the ties between members are stronger and the communication pattern within the group is that everyone is connected with everyone.

Second, large groups are sparsely connected. As groups become larger, keeping high density as in small groups becomes impractical. Therefore, a model of densely connected smaller groups, sparsely connected between them becomes more reasonable to foster communication and resource circulation (see figure II). In this model, the multiple memberships of individuals in different small groups serve as a link between those groups. As the number of group

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<sup>43</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 342-348.

<sup>44</sup> Cf. *ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> Cf. *ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> Watts, D. J. (1999).



members having multiple membership increases, so does the strength of the tie between those groups.<sup>47</sup>

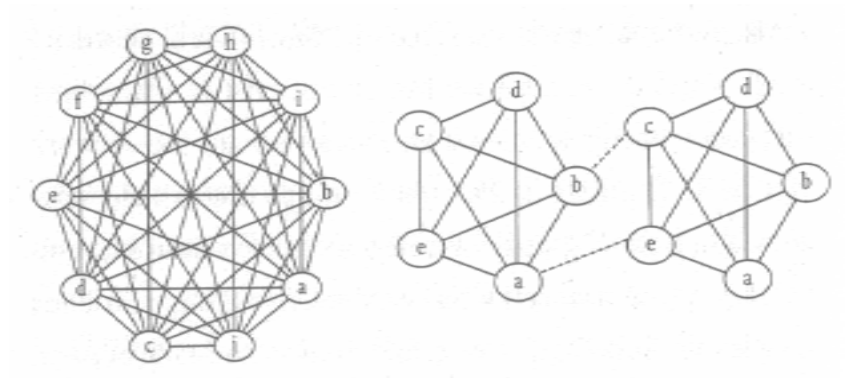


Figure II: Two ways of connecting ten people.

Source: Shirky, C. (2008), 216.

By applying this model to larger groups, one can maintain large interconnected networks. Although sparse, small-world networks are efficient and robust. Because the average member doesn't perform a critical function, this configuration makes a network highly resistant to random damage (in contrast to a hierarchical construction, where almost each member is critical).<sup>48</sup>

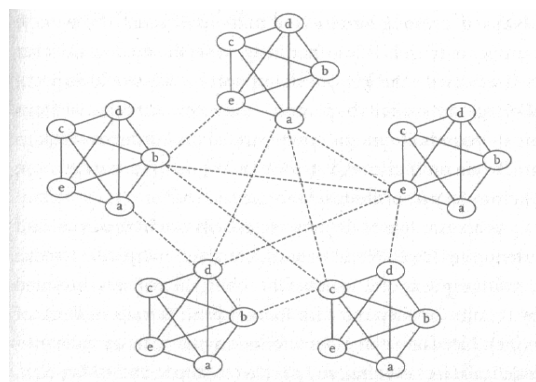


Figure III: An optimal network, as described in the small worlds model

Source: Shirky, C. (2008), 217.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. Shirky, C. (2008), 212-232.

<sup>48</sup> Cf. *ibid.*

### 3. ICT and Collective Action – A Reciprocal Relation

Scholars from a wide range of disciplines, among them sociology, political science and communication, are trying to understand the changes that ICTs offer in the way people communicate and collaborate for collective action. To date however, there is a lack of accredited theoretical framework in which existing and new works can be located.<sup>49</sup>

An overview of the social movement theory literature reveals that the degree of emphasis on the role of ICTs in collective action varies between different models and theories. Some theories, such as the strain and breakdown theories, give very little or no attention at all to the technologies used for communication and circulation of movement or action related information. Possible reasons may include ICT's being taken for granted or overlooked, that main focus of the theories is directed to other factors, or that there may also be a need for further research work on the subject. In some theories, such as resource mobilization and several cultural approaches, communication and dissemination of information receive an explicit emphasis, and therefore a conscious attention to ICT is made.

The resource mobilization theory considers (movement related) information, knowledge, cultural objects etc. as resources that must be (similarly to other resources) aggregated, managed, share and efficiently used.<sup>50</sup> In this way, they acknowledge the changes that ICTs bring to those processes as they develop.

Cultural approaches on the other hand, focus on meanings that are mediated through information and cultural objects, as well as on their acceptance among the audience, i.e. the resonance/dissonance that they create with prior meanings, knowledge and understandings (frames) on the recipient level.<sup>51</sup> As ICTs often serve as a central channel through which cultural objects and information are mediated, cultural approaches tend to offer considerable attention to their role in collective action.<sup>52</sup>

There are many examples, which illustrate the relation between various ICTs and collective action. To name a few are the technologies used for the production and distribution of samizdat (i.e. fax machines and photocopiers) during the cold war<sup>53</sup>, Radio Free Europe's

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<sup>49</sup> Cf. R. Kelly, G. (2006).

<sup>50</sup> Cf. Edwards, B., & John, D. M. (2004).

<sup>51</sup> Cf. Williams, R. H. (2004).

<sup>52</sup> Cf. R. Kelly, G. (2006).

<sup>53</sup> Cf. Morozov, E. (2011), 46-56.

transmission of anti-communist messages in Eastern Europe during the same period<sup>54</sup> and radio transmission resulting with the genocide in Ruanda<sup>55</sup>, or a group of strangers coordinating its actions over a designated webpage, MySpace and email communication in order to retrieve a lost/stolen cell phone.<sup>56</sup>

In the above examples ICTs support collective action in various ways: making states of relative deprivation visible and accelerating the formation of shared awareness, supporting the dissemination of frames, expanding social networks, making the aggregation and use of resources held by different group members more efficient as well as producing access to new resources.

It is important to note that these and other aspects rarely operate alone and usually intertwine with one another. That is to say, a case of collective action can be analyzed using different theoretical frameworks with the focus of analysis varying between those frameworks but also having overlapping aspects.<sup>57</sup>

As ICTs facilitate different functions in collective action, the former's development influences the latter's repertoire.<sup>58</sup> As Edwards and McCarthy note, there is a shift in the means of sharing movement related information or of contacting large numbers of people as ICT techniques develop. They use the telephone as an example for lessening the importance of physical presence and participation as well as email communication replacing "phone trees".<sup>59</sup>

To this point, the change offered by the development of ICTs can be described as what philosophers call a *difference in degree*. This means that the influence of ICTs on collective action kept it in its existing form but with increased degrees of efficiency. The aim of the next chapter is to examine if social media, as a further step in ICT's development, can also offer a *difference in kind*. In other words, can social media not only improve collective action, but rather revolutionize it?<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Cf. *ibid*.

<sup>55</sup> Cf. Morozov, E. (2011), 226.

<sup>56</sup> Cf. Shirky, C. (2008), 1-24.

<sup>57</sup> Cf. A. Snow, D., A. Soule, S., & Kriesi, H. (2004).

<sup>58</sup> Cf. Taylor, V., & Van Dyke, N. (2004), 273.

<sup>59</sup> Cf. Edwards, B., & John, D. M. (2004), 119.

<sup>60</sup> On the basis of the various aspects outlined from the social movement theory, I will analytically examine this assumption, made in (Shirky, C. (2008), 143-160).

## 4. Leveraging Collective Action via ICT-Based Social Media – From *Difference in Degree to Difference in Kind?*

To address the above stated assumption I will concentrate my examination on social media's effect on various factors of collective action, using older ICTs mostly as a benchmark for the analysis.

### 4.1. Many-to-Many Communication

As social media's most common attribute, and the one distinguishing it from other ICT-functionalities, many-to-many communication has the potential for a profound effect on collective action.

Prior to the Internet, one could tell apart two sorts of media. *One-Way Media* or *Broadcast Media*, such as radio, television, newspapers, and books, is media supporting one-directional transfer of information, usually from a central place to a broad audience. In one-way media, for audiences to provide feedback there is a need to use another medium (e.g. audience voting via SMS in programs such as *American Idol* or letters to the editor of a newspaper). On the other hand, *Two-Way Media* or *Communications Media* are interactive and facilitate communication between two individuals or a small group. Examples are telephone and telegrams. The communication patterns in those media types are *one-to-many* and *one-to-one* respectively.<sup>61</sup>

In contrast, the many-to-many communication pattern combines the broad audience attribute of the former with the communication attribute of the latter, enabling a group conversation. Although in some cases it can facilitate also one-to-one communication, Shirky places the email as the first tool offering many-to-many communication (e.g. a correspondence of many recipients, as in mailing lists). Platforms that were subsequently developed facilitate this function more effectively and in some cases as their central functionality.<sup>62</sup>

Using an example of a particular case, the shooting and subsequent death of Dr. George Tiller that took place on May 31, 2009, in Wichita, Kansas, Yardi and Boyd<sup>63</sup> illustrate very clearly how such communication can take place in Twitter<sup>64</sup>. Following the aim to analyze Twitter's

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<sup>61</sup> Cf. Hogan, B., & Quan-Haase, A. (2010), 310-311; Shirky, C. (2008), 86-90.

<sup>62</sup> Cf. Shirky, C. (2008), 86-90.

<sup>63</sup> Cf. Yardi, S., & Boyd, D. (2010).

<sup>64</sup> Twitter is a micro-blogging platform for sharing 140 characters long messages. Various signs within the messages, such as *hashtags* (phrases tagged using the # sign as prefix) allow the functionalities of hyperlinking

effect on group polarization, Yardi and Boyd describe in their article the public debate on the shooting case, the social movement groups and individuals that took part in the discussion, the positions expressed, and most significantly the manner in which Twitter's platform facilitated a discussion of multiple unrelated participants (many-to-many).

In the following sections I will turn back to the many-to-many model in order to elaborate on its effect on the discussed factors of collective action.

## **4.2. From Organizations to Disorganizations**

By decentralizing the communication between individuals or groups and fostering a non-linear many-to-many communication, social media affects collective action at its structure. It facilitates the adoption of decentralized and non-hierarchical organizational forms and makes grassroots organization of collective action more feasible.<sup>65</sup>

### **4.2.1. Organization Without Organization**

Shirky addressed this effect by articulating the difference between group organization over social media and the classical model of a hierarchical (institutional) organization. In the latter, the organization's operation is built on hierarchy. Each level (person) in the hierarchy is vital for the communication between her superior and subordinate levels (persons). Each person also has defined tasks to perform, relying on others to perform their tasks in the hierarchy as well, for a smooth operation of the organization. The hierarchical structure and its limitations grew out of economical necessity to maintain the efficient operation of large organization on the market as well as out of a structural necessity. As organizations grow, a defined hierarchy preserves the ability for communication within the organization without creating chaos and although the hierarchy reduces some transaction costs, these costs stay significant.<sup>66</sup>

Social media on the other hand, offers methods for organizing large groups of people for collective action without resorting to the hierarchical structure. It facilitates many-to-many communication without creating the chaos which otherwise have been created, when a large quantity of individuals tries to communicate with each other without a regulating structure. It also offers new ways of managing social movement or collective action related information,

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and aggregation of messages. Those attributes can support the communication in some cases (e.g. aggregating all messages to a topic using a relevant hashtag) or limit it in other cases (e.g. difficulty formulating a message within the 140 characters boundary). (Cf. Yardi, S., & Boyd, D. (2010))

<sup>65</sup> Cf. R. Kelly, G. (2006); Dahlgren, P. (2009), 190-200.

<sup>66</sup> Cf. Shirky, C. (2008), 25-54.

which lift the need for hierarchy to communicate this information and inform participant of task assignments. Thus supporting the coordination of people's actions without having them performing predefined tasks.<sup>67</sup>

#### 4.2.2. Disorganizations

Lash theorized the phenomenon of groups that exceed the organizational structure under the term *disorganizations*.<sup>68</sup> For Lash, disorganizations are one consequence of digitization and *informationization*, a state in which media, culture and politics exist as digital information upon a “mechanically mediated”<sup>69</sup> space where “there is no outside anymore”<sup>70</sup>. This state creates a *network society* and an information order with disappearing differences within cultural production, media, and politics.<sup>71</sup>

He defines organizations as “hierarchical systems of normative rules”<sup>72</sup>, as “playing fields of interacting, strategically acting and negotiating agents”<sup>73</sup>, and as means to ends (therefore following a *logic of means*).<sup>74</sup> Disorganizations in contrast, follow a *logic of ends* more than the logic of means (and perceive ends as inseparable from means); they are not fixed, less hierarchical, and more horizontal in structure; they do not reproduce values, but rather continually innovate and produce values. They also recognize the limits of their values, their finitude and their parallel existence alongside values of other communities.<sup>75</sup>

Due to its broad and somewhat abstract nature, many forms of social movements, institutions and groups can fall under this definition of disorganizations. One of those forms is the phenomenon of groups that are formed over social media and act collectively in pursue of a goal. Both Lash and Shirky address this new structure as consequence of the new abilities offered by information systems and (ICT-based) *social tools*<sup>76</sup> and describe its relation to and difference from the classical organizational structure.

With their non-institutional character, various forms *collective behavior* are the type of collective action, which is most affected from the ability of decentralized organization offered

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<sup>67</sup> Cf. *ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> Lash, S. (2002), 39-48.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>71</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 1-11.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>74</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 42-43.

<sup>75</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 39-48.

<sup>76</sup> The term used in (Shirky, C. (2008)) for social media.

by social media. Instances of collective behavior, which pursue short-term goals, need less complex strategies of action, and rely mainly on the quantity of participants, are a perfect match for this type of organization.

#### 4.2.3. Flickr and the Google-Index

To illustrate this notion, Shirky uses the example of Flickr<sup>77</sup>. As users use tags to label their uploaded pictures, the system offers them related tags that have already been used by others and automatically links pictures with same or similar tags. In this manner, a collection of pictures, a pictured documentation of an event for example, can be created by an otherwise uncoordinated group of people. Shirky emphasizes the distinction between a central coordination of people (as in the classical form of organizations) and the system's ability (in this case – Flickr's ability) to support groups of people to coordinate themselves:<sup>78</sup>

“Flickr is simply a platform; whatever coordination happens comes from the users and is projected onto the site.”<sup>79</sup>

In other words, social media platforms have in some cases the ability to support a decentralized synchronization of individual actors by creating information-links of their actions. In this manner a collective behavior form of collective action can be (1) supported and become more efficient or (2) created, as social media offers substitute to other formation mechanisms of collective behavior, such as shared awareness.

Even though social media can support the creation of collective action which otherwise wouldn't have been possible or even thought of (as in the Flickr example), it is not a *creatio ex nihilo*. Social media's *social affordance* means people use social media in order to interact, share information, communicate, and perceive their social environment.<sup>80</sup> They deliberately contribute to a collective action<sup>81</sup>, also if sometimes unaware of its ends. That is to say, social media offers new and 'ridiculously easy' ways for group forming<sup>82</sup>. Those 'ridiculously easy' ways help people overcome difficulties of coordination, organization, and communication in

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<sup>77</sup> An online picture-sharing platform with functionalities such as *tagging* classification, aggregation of picture's metadata, and linking between resources (pictures). (Cf. Marlow, C., Naaman, M., Boyd, D., & Davis, M. (2006))

<sup>78</sup> Cf. Shirky, C. (2008), 31-47.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>80</sup> Cf. Hogan, B., & Quan-Haase, A. (2010), 310.

<sup>81</sup> *Group effort* in Shirky's terms.

<sup>82</sup> Paquet, S. (09. October 2002); Shirky, C. (2008), 54.

large groups. These difficulties are often the obstacles that prevent people from fulfilling basic human desires and talents for collective action.<sup>83</sup>

This participation aspect distinguishes social media from other information platforms that aggregate information created by users for a common good but without users' actual participation.<sup>84</sup> As Shirky compares Flickr with Google:

“There are also ways of unknowingly sharing your work, as when Google reads the linking preferences of hundreds of millions of Internet users. These users are helping create a communally available resource, as Flickr users are, but unlike Flickr, the people whose work Google is aggregating aren't actively choosing to make their contributions.”<sup>85</sup>

The Google-Index therefore, is not a result of collective action. The creation of the Google-Index has some similarities to the creation of a picture database in Flickr on the level of aggregation and linking of information, but it excludes other important factors of collective action, such as users' *agency*<sup>86</sup>.

### **4.3. Faster, Better, Cheaper**

#### **4.3.1. Speed and Efficiency**

ICT's ability to accelerate and geographically extend the dissemination of social movement information is often noted on in the literature.<sup>87</sup> With the communication capabilities of social media, such as sharing and many-to-many communication, the dissemination of information and its discussion have reached a new pace that was only imaginable up until now.

The new pace of information-dissemination over social media is embodied in many contexts: one doesn't need to clip an article out of a newspaper, photocopy it, and mail it to friends via post. She can send a link to an online version of the article via Email or share it on a social media platform for everyone to see<sup>88</sup>; blogs' ability to offer instant-publishing with global availability<sup>89</sup>; sharing of news over Twitter often precede its publication by traditional

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<sup>83</sup> Cf. Shirky, C. (2008), 45-47.

<sup>84</sup> Cf. Shirky, C. (2008), 49.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Individuals' socially constituted capacity to act independently and to make their own choices. (Cf. Baker, C. (2000), 179-192)

<sup>87</sup> Cf. R. Kelly, G. (2006).

<sup>88</sup> Cf. Shirky, C. (2008), 148-151.

<sup>89</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 70-73.



media<sup>90</sup>; and the relevance of the first 24 hours in discussion of news topics in Twitter<sup>91</sup> are several examples.

The different social media platforms with their various functionalities also offer improved efficiency in pursuing social movement's goals. They encourage innovative use; allow integration and (sometimes overlapping) association of various sources and materials (e.g. text, picture, video and sound); allow the creation of flexible information-environments, in which individuals can tailor their encounter with the content in a way that suits best to their learning styles; and offer on-demand access to current information, allowing individuals to access relevant information quickly and easily.<sup>92</sup>

#### 4.3.2. Reduced Costs

“Money is a necessity. No matter how many other resources a movement mobilizes it will incur costs and someone has to pay the bills.”<sup>93</sup>

Material resources play a central role in the resource mobilization theory. They are generally more tangible, more proprietary, and regarding money also more fungible than other resource types. Large proportion of fungible resources enables a movement greater flexibility and money, as a highly fungible resource, can be converted to other resources and therefore compensates lack of access to those resources through other mechanisms. For example, employing paid staff and professionals can compensate shortage of human resources.<sup>94</sup>

Communication, aggregation and self-production of cultural resources, and dissemination of movement related information, are all actions that depend on ICTs and have significant costs embedded in them. By facilitating these functionalities and offering them free of charge, social media platforms tremendously reduce the costs of collective action.<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> Cf. An, J., Cha, M., Gummadi, K., & Crowcroft, J. (2011).

<sup>91</sup> Cf. Yardi, S., & Boyd, D. (2010).

<sup>92</sup> Cf. Hogan, B., & Quan-Haase, A. (2010); Shirky, C. (2008), 77-78; R. Kelly, G. (2006).

<sup>93</sup> Edwards, B., & John, D. M. (2004), 128.

<sup>94</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 128-131.

<sup>95</sup> Cf. Shirky, C. (2008), 25-80; R. Kelly, G. (2006); Dahlgren, P. (2009), 190-200.

#### 4.3.3. The Effect on Collective Action

Shirky's *organizations without organization* and Lash's *disorganizations* do not differ from traditional organizational forms only by their structure. The transaction costs embedded in these structures also diminish, as new organization models form over social media.<sup>96</sup> Thus affecting another dimension of the 'ridiculously easy group forming' by removing the significant costs-barrier in the formation of groups (and in turn, of collective action).

The costs and delays associated with prior ICTs created many difficulties for the coordination of geographically distant actors, especially of transnational social movement organizations. The instant communication for low costs offered by new ICTs, primarily the Internet and social media, is highly valuable (however not always essential) for transnational social movements.<sup>97</sup>

Reduced costs don't affect collective action only from the organizational but also from the individual actor perspective. As Diani noted: "[...] the more costly and dangerous the collective action, the stronger and more numerous the ties had to be in order to support decisions to participate."<sup>98</sup>

When combining the low costs of organization and participation with the highly connected social networks which are part of social media's nature, the *rational choice* of the individual actor is also ought to be affected and the probability for participation can be dramatically increased.

Furthermore, social media considerably increases social movements' ability to reach greater audience, thus contributing to aggregation of moral and human resources.

In conclusion, the development of ICTs not only increases the speed and efficiency of collective action processes, but also decreases the embedded costs. The winning feature of social media lays not only in the speed and efficiency that are offered by it for little or no cost, but rather in the combination of those aspects with one's social environment (i.e. with her social networks).

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<sup>96</sup> Cf. Shirky, C. (2008), 25-54.

<sup>97</sup> Cf. R. Kelly, G. (2006).

<sup>98</sup> Diani, M. (2004), 342.

#### 4.4. Prosumers of Collective Action

##### 4.4.1. Breaching the Dichotomy Between Producers and Audience

A further existing structure, beside the organizational one, which is affected from social media, regards the creation and consumption of content.

The most distinct aspect of Web 2.0 is participation (as opposed to simply publishing). The transformation from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0 can be distinguished as the move from ‘dumping’ offline, print content, onto the Internet, to the creation of online-only platforms that utilize the collaborative capabilities of ICT.<sup>99</sup>

Shirky talks about the “mass amateurization of efforts previously reserved for media professionals.”<sup>100</sup> For Shirky, a *professional class* acquires some sort of specialization in its profession, it creates norms for the practice of the profession and acknowledges only praxis that is compatible with those norms, and the scarcity of resources plays a major role in its creation. He gives journalism and librarianship as examples. As a counterpart for journalism Shirky mentions the blog movement, which gradually redefines news “from news as an institutional prerogative to news as part of a communications ecosystem, occupied by a mix of formal organizations, informal collectives, and individuals.”<sup>101</sup> Consequently, it undermines the role of traditional journalism as a gatekeeper of ‘news-worthiness’. The costs of publishing using older, mainly Low-Tech, ICTs have created a scarcity that helped form the profession of journalism. But the use of social media platforms, such as blogs, changes the equation by offering low-cost solutions, which also have more functionalities and flexibility than the traditional media.<sup>102</sup> In addition, An et al. characterized *micro journalism* as an alternative form of news dissemination and consumption using social media platforms, mainly Twitter.<sup>103</sup>

The above-discussed aspects of speed, efficiency and reduced costs offered by social media have a profound contribution to these changing structures. As Shirky noted, the scarcity of resources has initiated the creation of professions, such as journalism. In other words, the scarcity of resources initiates the formation of institutions with specific social functions. Those institutions also grow to define the social functions they fulfill and serve as control-

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<sup>99</sup> O'Reilly, T. (30. September 2005).

<sup>100</sup> Shirky, C. (2008), 55.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>102</sup> Cf. ibid., 55-80.

<sup>103</sup> Cf. An, J., Cha, M., Gummadi, K., & Crowcroft, J. (2011).

mechanisms, giving and denying the legitimacy for fulfilling those social functions.<sup>104</sup>

Furthermore, many of these institutions, such as mass media outlets, tend to exhibit a bias favoring related institutions (e.g. establishing or financing institutions) and figures of authority (e.g. politicians related to high-ranked individuals in the institution).<sup>105</sup>

It is notable that social media, with its increased speed and efficiency of communication for drastically reduced costs, has affected those institutions. When scarcity of resources doesn't play a role any longer and the dissemination of information takes place quickly and effectively, the dichotomy between producers and audience changes as well. As a result, collective action has greater chances to take the form of a bottom-up process. More cases of collective action, which previously wouldn't have taken place, can be achieved thanks to social media.<sup>106</sup>

While removing filters makes useful information available, it simultaneously poses the danger of decline in the accuracy and quality of the (social movement related) information being circulated. Because of the ease of dissemination of information online, individuals can exert less effort to verify information before sharing it or even deliberately disseminate false information in order to pursue their goals. On the other hand, *the wisdom of crowds*<sup>107</sup> principle embedded in many social media platforms can contribute to the repression of such inaccurate information and online-audience can also use the Internet to verify information and compare sources.<sup>108,109</sup>

R. Kelly also noted on the possible effect this phenomenon could have on political elites, who are likely to act more consistently with citizen concerns if they work in an environment where they must assume their actions are being observed. Inappropriate actions can quickly reach the public, even if they traditionally wouldn't have got any considerable media attention.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>104</sup> The aim of this paper is not to discuss the contemporary change in professions such as journalism and librarianship. Nor to discuss which actors should enjoy the privileges accompanying those professions neither the legitimacy of non-specialized actors to engage in it. Those issues are being widely discussed, both publicly and within inside-discourses of the professions themselves. These issues are briefly addressed in (Shirky, C. (2008), 55-80).

<sup>105</sup> Cf. R. Kelly, G. (2006).

<sup>106</sup> Cf. Shirky, C. (2008), 55-80; R. Kelly, G. (2006).

<sup>107</sup> The aggregation of information in a group, resulting with a better output or decision than of one person. (Cf. Surowiecki, J. (2004))

<sup>108</sup> Cf. R. Kelly, G. (2006).

<sup>109</sup> Section 4.7. **(Re)Forming the Group** discusses the effect social media has on the exposure to a variety of sources.

<sup>110</sup> Cf. R. Kelly, G. (2006).

Framing processes, which are dependent on the flow of carefully produced movement related information (in the form of frames), are the factor of collective action that is mostly affected by the aspects discussed in this section of the paper. New ICTs, especially social media, help create networks over which frames can be propagated. They offer the ability to bypass mass media and increase representation of activists and non-mainstream or not biased opinions. On the other hand they can decrease the accuracy of the information circulated, offer visibility for other biased institutions or actors, and introduce the risk of information overload.<sup>111</sup>

#### 4.4.2. Breaking News

Previously, many occurrences wouldn't have become any attention in the media because of a low news-worthiness or because their publishing-costs (e.g. print and distribution) were higher than the estimated economical profit they could produce. Therefore, those occurrences have stayed outside the public consciousness and interest.<sup>112</sup> In contrast, social media supports efficient and cheap publishing and discussion as a bottom-up process. Many news are first published and discussed over social media platforms, such as blogs and Twitter, the public attention eventually draws the attention of traditional media which in turn increases the public awareness also outside social media platforms.<sup>113</sup>

Shirky's example of a controversial speech given by senator Trent Lott on senator Strom Thurmond's hundredth birthday in 2002 illustrates how this phenomenon works. The speech did not get any traditional media coverage due to its low news-worthiness and the event it was held on (a birthday party). However, both liberal and conservative bloggers continued discussing the speech, comparing it to Lott's former articulations and preventing the issue from disappearing. Five days afterwards senator Lott published an official apology, which then received broad coverage by traditional media, accompanied with quotations of the original speech. The incident ended with having an altering effect on Lott's political career.<sup>114</sup>

This phenomenon however, seems to be a further privilege of western democracies. With the example of various countries in the Arab world, Morozov stresses out that the effect bloggers can have on politicians, making them more accountable, is not unavoidable in other contexts.<sup>115</sup> He quotes Mamoun Fandy, a U.S.-based, Saudi-born scholar of Middle Eastern

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<sup>111</sup> Cf. Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Cf. Shirky, C. (2008), 55-80.

<sup>113</sup> Cf. Shirky, C. (2008), 55-80; An, J., Cha, M., Gummadi, K., & Crowcroft, J. (2011); R. Kelly, G. (2006); Dahlgren, P. (2009), 190-200.

<sup>114</sup> Cf. Shirky, C. (2008), 61-66.

<sup>115</sup> Cf. Morozov, E. (2011), 244.

politics “to see a debate similar to the American show *Crossfire* does not mean that freedom of speech in the Arab world is fully realized, any more than to see voting and ballot boxes means that democracy has taken hold.”<sup>116, 117</sup>

#### **4.5. Utilizing Social Media for Collective Action in Authoritarian Contexts**

“The threat from a group eating ice cream isn’t the ice cream but the group.”<sup>118</sup>

Authoritarian regimes launch crackdowns also on the smallest groups of protesters following the logic that also small protests accelerate shared awareness and open the door for larger protests.<sup>119</sup>

By offering a platform which connects otherwise unrelated individuals or groups and supports faster and more efficient organization of collective action for negligible (financial) costs, social media has changed the balance of power between (political) protesters and the institutions they protest against (governments first and foremost).

Social media can support the organization of instant-protests, such as flash mobs, while keeping the organization and its measures invisible until the moment it breaks out. Such organization allows events to be arranged without much advanced planning but with immediate visible results (the amount of people protesting on the street).<sup>120</sup> The information overload on the Internet can be of benefit for the organization of these short-term collective actions. While some actions can be organized very fast, the identification of suspected online-behavior, its analysis and the organization of an institutional reaction to it are time-costly tasks in the sea of information that is constantly created and circulated in social media.<sup>121</sup>

Shirky noted that “[e]ven if the government had the surveillance apparatus to know the identity of all the blog readers, it had no way of knowing which of them were planning to attend”<sup>122</sup> and emphasized the role of camera-phones and social media platforms for sharing of video and pictures, such as Youtube and Flickr, in leaking documentation of the protest to the outside world.<sup>123</sup>

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<sup>116</sup> Fandy, M. (2000) quoted in Morozov, E. (2011), 244.

<sup>117</sup> Further differences between the utilization of social media for collective action and political activism in democratic and authoritarian contexts and its possible implications are addressed in the following section.

<sup>118</sup> Shirky, C. (2008), 168.

<sup>119</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 161-187.

<sup>120</sup> Cf. *ibid.*

<sup>121</sup> Cf. Morozov, E. (2011) 167-170.

<sup>122</sup> Shirky C. (2008), 169.

<sup>123</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 161-187.

However, the increasing reliance on ICT and social media also creates new opportunities for demobilization efforts, thus posing a risk for social movements and collective action. In many cases, elites and their allies control or own the ICT-infrastructures. They can deny access to resources or alter the system's architecture to prevent undesirable uses.<sup>124</sup>

Morozov warns of the backfire-potential the utilization of these tools and methods could have in authoritarian regimes. He points out how the advantages that social media offers activists in authoritarian regimes are also advantages for the governments they protest against.<sup>125</sup>

Monitoring and cracking social media platforms of *social networking* such as Facebook<sup>126</sup> can reveal whole networks of government opponents, human rights activists, or persecuted minorities; monitoring the location of known activists through their cell phones and alerting any extra ordinary group gathering can launch a proactive crackdown on a supposed protest; applying facial recognition systems on protest documentation (which is openly available on social media platforms and later on in the foreign press) and cross-checking the information with social networking platforms can help locate activists, who were previously anonymous; cracking activists' email accounts can reveal relevant correspondences (both the content and the participants of those correspondences are highly valuable information); cross-linking of information such as group memberships in social networking platforms, blog-subscriptions, and Twitter followers can not only reveal existing activist-networks but also draw attention to possible future activists.<sup>127</sup>

Compared to "Low-Tech" methods of surveillance such as tapping phones and bugging apartments<sup>128</sup> it is clear that not only collective action and activism change in the course technological development, utilizing new capabilities for their advantage. Also their opponents can utilize the same tools for their own advantage. Furthermore, social media makes many new and valuable resources available for authoritarian regimes (just as it does for social movements). Those sources were previously not available or even non-existent, as activists did not tend to keep such a considerable amount of information and evidence regarding their activities and networks in one central place. Furthermore, the information and

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<sup>124</sup> Cf. R. Kelly, G. (2006).

<sup>125</sup> Cf. Morozov, E. (2011).

<sup>126</sup> In many countries, where Facebook and similar websites are blocked, there are local equivalents such as the Chinese social networking site Renren. (Cf. Gustin, S. (4. May 2011))

<sup>127</sup> Cf. Morozov, E. (2011), 143-178.

<sup>128</sup> Morozov points out the degree of difference by comparing the new surveillance capabilities with the methods used by the Stasi in East Germany during the cold war, giving the film *The Lives of Others* (*Das Leben der*

evidence they did possess could only be gained through physical access to it, unlike social media with its *cloud-computing* feature that makes remote access to the information possible, often without the user's (i.e. the activist's) knowledge.<sup>129</sup>

Most of these aspects do not cause concern for social movements or individuals, who are practicing political protest in democratic states where freedom of expression and freedom of assembly are constitutionally protected. In authoritarian regimes however, they can have grave consequences for activists, who enjoy the advantages of social media (sometimes taking examples from their counterparts in the west) but are unaware of its possible implications.

#### **4.6. A Long Tail (of Slacktivism)**

“Having a handful of motivated highly motivated people and a mass of barely motivated ones used to be a recipe for frustration. The people who were on fire wondered why the general population didn't care more, and the general population wondered why those obsessed people didn't just shut up.”<sup>130</sup>

Mobilizing individuals or groups to take part in collective action requires (according to the different social movement theories) aggregation and utilization moral and cultural resources, successful framing, increasing shared awareness, or in Shirky's words “convincing people who care a little to care more, so that they would be roused to act.”<sup>131</sup>

In some cases of collective action, social media can change this balance. It can lower the hurdles of participation and enable individuals who ‘care a little’ to participate and contribute in a smaller manner. By creating a more casual context of participation, which motivates individuals to be effective without becoming activists themselves, more individuals can be reached and by aggregating their (minor) participation an effect on collective action is possible. These ‘microcontributions’ also have the potential to lead to a greater sense of individual obligation.<sup>132</sup> In this manner a participation distribution that resembles the *long tail distribution* is created.

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*Anderen*) as an illustrating example. He further suggests that the time and human resources saved by the new ICTs are not spared, but rather being converted for amplifying the surveillance capabilities. (Cf. *ibid.*, 148-152)

<sup>129</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 143-178.

<sup>130</sup> Shirky, C. (2008), 181-182.

<sup>131</sup> Shirky, C. (2008), 181.

<sup>132</sup> Cf. Shirky, C. (2008), 181; R. Kelly, G. (2006).



On the other hand, this distribution also runs the danger of what Morozov termed as *Slacktivism*.<sup>133</sup> While participating in collective action in its more traditional manner was attached to taking actions in the real world, *digital activism* offers participation without leaving the comfort of ones home. But when it comes to mobilization for more concrete and less ‘digital’ actions, the participation seems to decrease dramatically.<sup>134</sup>

With digital activism, such as being a member of a group promoting a certain cause in Facebook, people tend to calm their social conscious without having to invest much effort. The online supporting of a cause can satisfy people just as writing letters to their elected representatives or organizing rallies, but without having the effect the latter might have.<sup>135</sup> Furthermore, in many social media platforms (such as Facebook) group memberships are a part of the construction of ones online identity.<sup>136</sup> As Morozov explained: “they believe that the kinds of Facebook campaigns and groups they join reveal more about them than whatever they put in the dull “about me” page.”<sup>137</sup>

“We don’t have to make fools of ourselves by singing “Happy Birthday” at the top of our lungs; others will do the job just fine.”<sup>138</sup>

The whole does not always exceed the sum of its parts. As the number of participants increases, the social pressure on each participant diminishes, resulting with inferior outcomes. When everyone in the group performs the same tasks, it’s impossible to evaluate individual contributions, and people inevitably begin ‘slacking off’.<sup>139</sup>

Morozov uses a popular Facebook cause, Saving the Children of Africa with its over 1.7 million members, as an example. Although the popularity of the group (or of its cause), it has raised about \$12,000 (0.007 cent per person). Of course, donating 0.007 cent is better than making no donation. However, many are also motivated to take the least painful sacrifice, donating a cent where they may otherwise donate a dollar.<sup>140</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> Pseudo-activism, which serves the calming of a person’s self-conscious and the maintenance of her (online) identity and image more than the engagement in influential activism. (Cf. Morozov, E. (2011), 179-203)

<sup>134</sup> Cf. Hesse, M. (2. July 2009).

<sup>135</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 179-203.

<sup>136</sup> The aspect of the construction of ones identity through (social movement) group affiliation was discussed earlier in this paper. See section **2.4.1. The Role of Social Networks in Collective Action**.

<sup>137</sup> Morozov, E. (2011), 186.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, 193.

<sup>139</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 179-203.

<sup>140</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 189-191.

The ease of raising money over the Internet and social media may result in shifting the primary focus of social movements to pursue monetary objectives (instead of political ones for example). The resource mobilization theory successfully acknowledges that not in every case money (although tangible, proprietary, and fungible) is the suitable mean for solving the problem at hand and other resource types always play a major role. So that shifting the focus of social movements' objectives or dismissing people from taking meaningful real-life action after making a donation can result with a contra-productive effect.<sup>141</sup>

Collective action is a much more complex and multi-faceted process than opening a Facebook group. Starting a social movement as a Facebook group or having a Facebook group *as* a social movement has very low chances to succeed and most of the groups of the sort fail to take the next step after mobilizing individuals to show support of their cause. On the other hand, the utilization of platforms such as Facebook and Twitter *as part of* a social movement's strategy, combined with other actions, can be proved more efficient.<sup>142</sup>

#### **4.7. (Re)Forming the Group**

The crucial characteristic of social media, *social affordance*, invokes and facilitates interaction and allows individuals to perceive aspects of their social environment.<sup>143</sup>

Therefore it is bound to have an effect on the construction of groups (i.e. of social networks) and their dynamics.<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> Cf. *ibid.*

<sup>142</sup> Cf. Morozov, E. (2011), 179-203; Hesse, M. (2. July 2009).

<sup>143</sup> Hogan, B., & Quan-Haase, A. (2010).

<sup>144</sup> This section of the paper will not address the ease of group forming, as it was addressed previously, but rather the effect social media can have on the constellation of social networks and their dynamics in regard to collective action.

#### 4.7.1. Small Worlds and the Relevance of Weak Ties

Due to their unique structures, social media platforms are a perfect reflection of the *small worlds model*: most Meetup<sup>145</sup> users are members of one or very few groups, but some of them are members of many groups, therefore creating ties between the small and dense groups; the most connected blogs are thousands of times more connected than the average blogs are, while the average ones are more likely to be part of a densely connected cluster; among hundreds of millions of MySpace and Facebook users, the average number of friends is a few dozens. Many of those friends create smaller, interconnected groups. Different groups are then linked to one another through one or a few users, who are co-members of both groups.<sup>146</sup>

Social media tends to increase the relevance of weak ties between social networks (i.e. between small worlds). By outlining users' social networks (e.g. through friends lists) and pointing out connections between different social networks (e.g. shared friends, overlapping group memberships), some platforms, such as Facebook, reveal connections between social networks that were previously unknown. They also foster the communication between different social networks. Many-to-many communication and the ability of a shared connection between different networks to serve as a bridge for information flow, without this connection serving as an active intermediate (e.g. members of different and otherwise unrelated social networks commenting a source posted on a shared connection's Facebook profile), are two ways of achieving this communication.<sup>147</sup>

The Small Worlds structure also tends to operate as both amplifier and filter of information. Because the information in these platforms is communicated through members of one's close social networks (e.g. family, friends and friends of friends), individuals tend to be exposed to information that is also of interest to their close social networks and therefore with high probability to be of interest for themselves also.<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> A platform designed for individuals to locate others with similar interests online and easily organize a meeting in the real world. (Cf. Shirky, C. (2008), 196)

<sup>146</sup> Cf. Shirky, C. (2008), 212-232.

<sup>147</sup> Cf. Shirky, C. (2008), 212-232; R. Kelly, G. (2006).

<sup>148</sup> Cf. Shirky, C. (2008), 212-232.

#### 4.7.2. Group Polarization and the Exposure to Information Sources

With the aid of social media it is easier for people to expand their existing social networks or to form new ones. Different platforms offer the creation of groups of people with common interests, goals or identities. Using these platforms, individuals can find others like them, engage in discussion and potentially join for collective action in the real world.

“When it is hard to form groups, both potentially good and bad groups are prevented from forming; when it becomes simple to form groups, we get both the good and bad ones.”<sup>149</sup>

With the ease, efficiency, speed and low costs of establishing such a community the spectrum of those online groups vary drastically: Star Trek and Radiohead fans, Pagans and Atheists, bloggers and journalists, stay at home moms and anorexic girls, peace activists and terrorists, anti-racism activists and neo-Nazis<sup>150</sup> – all of these and more come together on platforms such as Meetup and Facebook or on niche-websites dedicated to a certain topic.<sup>151</sup>

Considering the broad spectrum of those social networks, their ability for low-cost and efficient exchange of movement related information, discussion, and organization of collective action, it is clear that the spectrum of goals pursued by their collective action and the means used is also broad.

The presence of homophily<sup>152</sup>, which often exist within such groups, can limit people’s social networks and perception of the world, having implications for the information they receive, the attitude they form and the interactions they experience. Thus resulting with *group polarization*, a tendency of group member’s toward more extreme views.<sup>153</sup>

Some social media platforms offer a high degree of homophily and encourage group polarization. The new possibilities offered by social media don’t only help those groups to better coordinate their actions and goals, but also to efficiently share movement related information among members and related groups in order to bound them morally to the group and its goals and to dissociate them from groups of different nature.<sup>154</sup> In other words, social media supports an efficient dissemination of frames resulting with a successful framing process.

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<sup>149</sup> Shirky, C. (2008), 211.

<sup>150</sup> Examples given in Shirky, C. (2008), 188-211; Morozov, E. (2011), 179-203 and 245-274.

<sup>151</sup> Cf. Shirky, C. (2008), 188-211; Morozov, E. (2011), 245-274.

<sup>152</sup> Homophily is the principle that interactions between similar people occur more often than among dissimilar people. (Cf. Yardi, S., & Boyd, D. (2010), 318)

On the other hand, by facilitating many-to-many communication, some social media platforms can also encourage communication between groups and possibly decrease group polarization. Yardi and Boyd described the Twitter-discussion between opposite groups (mainly groups supporting or opposing abortions) regarding the shooting of Dr. George Tiller and the effect it had on the expressions of members of each group over time.<sup>155</sup> An et al. described the effect of social media (mainly Twitter) on the exposure to a diversity of sources, concentrating on users' exposure to right or left wing news sources with regard to their own political positioning and to the political positioning of other users in their networks.<sup>156</sup>

Similar effect can be also achieved in platforms such as Facebook, in which individuals simultaneously interact with people from their different social networks, such as family, friends, co-workers or old classmates. The views on different subjects is probable to vary greatly between those social networks, resulting with individuals being exposed to a variety of sources and views shared and discussed amongst their Facebook-friends. Although at the same time they are also exposed to information shared and discussed by their groups of membership where a high degree of homophily is probable to exist.

In conclusion, expanding existing social networks and joining new ones according to a person's views, group polarization, the exposure to sources and discussions (with higher or lower degree of homophily) – all these impact collective action on various levels. They affect processes of relative deprivation, shared awareness, and framing as well as the aggregation of moral, cultural, and human resources.

When facilitated by social media, the impact on collective action's forming processes differ from the impact of older ICTs mostly due to the fact that the information is circulated through ones real-world social networks (which use social media platforms to expand their interaction) and that the information-flow *between* different social networks or small worlds is supported, and sometimes even initiated, by the platform itself. Furthermore, social media also enables the creation of new social networks, which were impossible to create using older ICTs.

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<sup>153</sup> Cf. Yardi, S., & Boyd, D. (2010).

<sup>154</sup> Cf. Shirky, C. (2008), 188-211; Morozov, E. (2011), 245-274.

<sup>155</sup> Cf. Yardi, S., & Boyd, D. (2010).

<sup>156</sup> Cf. An, J., Cha, M., Gummadi, K., & Crowcroft, J. (2011).

## 5. Readjusting the Framework

“There is no recipe for the successful use of social tools [social media]. Instead, every working system is a mix of social and technological factors.”<sup>157</sup>

### 5.1. Promise, Tools, Bargain

Shirky breaks down the factors connecting ICT, social media and collective action to three components: promise, tool and bargain (PTB).<sup>158</sup>

In terms of social movement theory and in accordance with Shirky’s outline of PTB, promise provides the basic reason for individuals to join a social movement or take part in collective action. It relates to moral resources and framing processes and affects relative deprivation, shared awareness, and rational choice. Tools, in the sense of ICTs and social media platforms, assist the coordination and execution of a social movement or a collective action. They cooperate with or have an effect on cultural, social-organizational, human and material resources as well as framing processes and social networks. Bargain regards the methods of action, rules and norms followed etc. It can be addressed as *methods* of framing processes, the *ethos* formed and followed<sup>159</sup>, as well as the *methods* of aggregation and utilization of resources.<sup>160</sup>

Tools can often contain unpredictable and sometimes undesirable side effects. Criteria for their choice should be the avoidance (or at times even the utilization) of those side effects, the best match the movement’s resources and goals, a critical mass of use in order for it to be effective, as well as relevant information literacy<sup>161</sup> amongst the target audience.<sup>162</sup>

The social movement theory shows us that the interactions between the different components of collective action (social, technical, structural etc.) are very complex. Shirky’s PTB model offers no recipe for success, but rather a framework to assist the utilization of social media in the best manner to follow social movements’ goals as well as to analyze the successes and failures of social movements using or even relying on social media.<sup>163</sup>

Collective action is a very complex und multi-facetted social process, which is only partially understood, even with an extensive analysis using the different social movement theories. As

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<sup>157</sup> Shirky, C. (2008), 261.

<sup>158</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 260-292.

<sup>159</sup> Cf. Gurak, L. J. (1999).

<sup>160</sup> Cf. Shirky, C. (2008), 260-292.

<sup>161</sup> For this aim I will suggest the need for theorizing *social media literacy*, a hybrid form of social competence and information literacy regarding the use of social media as a type of ICT.

<sup>162</sup> Cf. Shirky, C. (2008), 260-292; Aaker, J., Smith, A., & Adler, C. (2010).

pointed out in the previous chapter of the paper, ICT and social media should be analyzed in relation to other factors of collective action. ICT and social media facilitate many of these factors and, depending on their utilization, can contribute to collective action or in some cases also to enable it for the first time. But they can also prove to be contra-productive for some factors of collective action resulting with demobilization effects causing more drawback than improvement. As the role of ICT and social media in the process of collective action becomes more significant, sometimes to an extent that grants the process a completely new form, the PTB model offers the required adjustment in the emphasis given to the analysis-variables by putting ICT and social media in its center (*tool*) without neglecting their relation to other collective action factors.

However, not overemphasizing the role of social media in the processes of collective action and avoiding the assignment of false attribute to those platforms are of crucial importance when addressing their role in social processes. Tools are only means that are used by people and do not facilitate collective action or social change by themselves. In order to emphasize the importance of this claim for the analysis of social media's role in collective action, this issue will be addressed in the next section of the paper, before turning to the conclusion and outlook.

## **5.2. Technology Doesn't Change the World, People Do**

### **5.2.1. Between the Neutrality Thesis and Technological Determinism**

Philosophers deal to a great extent with issues of neutrality and embedded values in technology. Technological artifacts are shaped by society; therefore they are value-laden and have certain affordance for their use. In other words, technological artifacts have “built-in tendencies to promote or demote the realization of particular values.”<sup>163</sup> This stands in contrast to the *neutrality thesis*, which holds that there are no consequences that are inherent to technological artifacts. The idea of absolute built-in consequences on the other hand, employs a deterministic conception of technology. It is more accurate to claim that there are strong tendencies for particular consequences to occur in all or most of the central uses of an artifact. Furthermore, in some cases the central uses of certain artifacts may vary between contexts. Technological artifact's affordance and therefore manner in which it is used depend not only on its design but also on the social contexts it finds itself in.<sup>165</sup>

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<sup>163</sup> Cf. Shirky, C. (2008), 260-292.

<sup>164</sup> Brey, P. (2010), 43.

<sup>165</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 41-58.

Brey uses the example of a gas-engine automobile. It can be used for commuter traffic, leisure driving, transfer cargo, hit jobs, auto racing, but also as a museum piece, shelter from the rain or barricade. In all but the last three uses, gasoline is used up, greenhouse gases and other pollutants are emitted, noise is generated and at least one person (the driver) is being moved around at high speed. These consequences are not absolute; they do not appear in all uses of the automobile (although the last three are peripheral and not central uses) and can be avoided (driving an electric car for example).<sup>166</sup>

Turning back to ICTs, due to their complexity and often the variety of possible uses, they are probable to have biases (and therefore also values) embedded in them. These biases can be divided to three types of origin:

1. *Preexisting biases* – *individual* ones resulting from the values of those who design the system and *societal* ones resulting from organizations, institutions and the general culture that constitute the context in which the system is developed.
2. *Technical biases* which arise from technical constraints or considerations.
3. *Emergent bias*, which arises when the social context in which the system is used is not the one, intended by its designers.<sup>167</sup>

As for social media, on the one hand, the most common social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter and many blog-platforms, are designed by companies based in Western countries so that one would assume democratic and free speech values to be embedded in them. On the other hand, these are also organizations driven by and for financial profit so that their choices in dilemmas between possible financial implications and standing for democratic values or their users' right for free speech are not always predictable. Furthermore, the individual values of the systems' designers are usually unknown.<sup>168</sup>

### 5.2.2. Beware of Cyber-Utopianism and Internet-Centrism

The embodiment of *Cyber-utopianism*<sup>169</sup> and *Internet-centrism*<sup>170</sup> in (western) politicians' and mass media's approach toward the Internet and social media<sup>171</sup>, is a clear case of a

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<sup>166</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 43-46.

<sup>167</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, 49-50.

<sup>168</sup> Cf. Zuckerman, E. (2010); Morozov, E. (2011), 1-33 and 205-244; M. Macla, C. (2010).

<sup>169</sup> "The idea that the Internet favors the oppressed rather than the oppressor [...] a naïve belief in the emancipatory nature of online communication that rests on stubborn refusal to acknowledge its downside" (Morozov, E. (2011), xiii).

<sup>170</sup> The reframing of democratic and social change in terms of the Internet rather than the context in which that change is to occur. (Cf. Morozov, E. (2011), xvi)

<sup>171</sup> Cf. Morozov, E. (2011), ix-xvii, 1-56, 275-299.



deterministic view toward the democratic values embedded in these systems and their allegedly unavoidable revolutionary consequences. Morozov warns of the grave consequences this approach can have for activism, as western politicians tend to follow it in foreign affairs and mass media overemphasizes the significance of these tools, both drawing authoritarian regimes' attention to their role in activism.<sup>172</sup>

When zooming out to the general collective action context, *cyber-utopianism* and *social media centrism*<sup>173</sup> are dangerous tendencies for the engagement in and analysis of collective action.

In dependence on Brey's assumptions regarding the neutrality of ICT, I argue that also social media platforms are not neutral tools; their design contains (1) preexisting biases, such as western norms and financial interests, (2) technical biases such as bandwidth and limited computing abilities but also restrictions such as the 140 characters limitation in Twitter, and (3) emergent biases, as ICTs contain affordances (e.g. social affordance as a key feature of social media) but can be utilized in different ways and for different goals.<sup>174</sup>

As argued in the previous chapter of the paper, social media do not facilitate collective action or social change by itself. These are tools used by people who can have different goals and ways of action. This means not only that social media can be utilized for collective action goals that are not always of positive nature (e.g. racism, homophobia, pro-anorexia), but also that the opponents of certain social movements can utilize these tools for their own advantage as well.

For these reasons an extra precaution is needed when the role of social media in collective action is addressed. *Cyber-utopianism* will cause disregard of negative or contra productive use of the possibilities offered by social media, which can have grave results for collective action or for the activists themselves. *Social media centrism* will concentrate mainly on social media's role while neglecting other collective action factors (without which social media will not have a collective action to facilitate in the first place) and also runs the danger of *Slacktivism*.

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<sup>172</sup> Cf. Morozov, E. (2011), 1-56.

<sup>173</sup> On the basis of Morozov's definition of Internet-centrism, I will address *social media centrism* as the reframing of collective action and social change in terms of social media alone, rather than the context in which that change is to occur.

<sup>174</sup> For examples see section 4.5. **Utilizing Social Media for Collective Action in Authoritarian Contexts.**

## Conclusions and Outlook

ICTs and social media are tools used by people. They are neither neutral nor bound to produce certain consequences and do not facilitate democracy, political change, or even collective action by themselves. The manner and skillfulness in which they are used, combined with the social, cultural, political, financial and structural conditions in the contexts, in which they are used, are to determine their effect on collective action.

Therefore, I agree only partially with Shirky's assumption.<sup>175</sup> As with prior developments in ICT and although social media brings new factors into the collective action equation, social media's impact on collective action is of *difference in degree*. The degree of impact varies between cases of collective action. It depends on the type of social media platform utilized, the manner of utilization, and most important – on the interaction with other collective action factors.

In some cases however, the profound changes in collective action offered by social media or the fact that social media made it possible for the first time to form a social movement and/or to mobilize people to engage in collective action, can make an impact of *difference in kind* on collective action and thus revolutionize it. But also in these cases, it is not the *tools* alone, but rather their correlation with the *promise* and *bargain* (that is to say, with the various factors of collective action) and most important with the people who engage in collective action that makes the striking difference.

It is also of crucial importance to keep in mind that social media's impact on collective action does not always prove to be positive. False use, utilization of unsuitable tools, exploitation by actors with different interests etc. can produce a contra-productive effect. In this case the *difference in degree* will mean a demobilizing effect, a less productive or even superfluous collective action (as with *Slacktivism*). A *difference in kind* will mean a failure or results opposite to the intended ones.

Although there are many examples for cases of collective action leveraged or supported by social media, it is a relatively new phenomenon, which constantly changes and develops. Many authors address these issues in different contexts, but there is still a salient need (1) for an extensive theoretical work to integrate these aspects into the existing models of social movement theory and (2) to develop an analysis-framework that addresses ICTs and social

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<sup>175</sup> Shirky, C. (2008), 143-160.

media *in their* correlation with other factors of collective action and that acknowledges also the disadvantages these tools can have for collective action.

In the engagement in collective action as well as in the analysis of its results, a framework of this kind will potentially help avoiding many risks mentioned in this paper, it will promote a safer and more efficient utilization of ICTs and social media, and will empower people as their role in collective action is emphasized in relation to the tools they use and not the other way around.

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